

# Shadowed Heritages: Newa History in Pokhara



*Pokhara from a hill top. [Picture by: [Nepal11 Live](#) ]*

When we first hear the word Pokhara, our mind envisions a scene of tourist gleam, sparkling lakes and an ambiance of modern cities; Phewa Lake, Begnas Lake, paragliding, hiking and much more. The gleam of a growing city in Province number 4 with arresting scenery, adventure, and abundant choices is what Pokhara is known for. From caves to lakes, sports to mountains, trekking and rafting, gliding and boating, Pokhara is a pearl in its own. Amidst all the charisma it holds, a shade has formed on one of its oldest charm: the Pulaan Bazaa (Old Bazar).

Surrounded by swelling city expansion, the Pulaan Bazaa of Pokhara struggling to maintain its identity takes back to story of 26 household's 200 km journey three centuries ago.

## A young valley



*Seti river and Pokhara [Photo credit: Monique Fort]*

With diverse narratives on origination of Pokhara, the valley is said to be a young valley originated five centuries ago due to a natural catastrophe. Monique Fort of Paris Diderot University, Paris UP7 with expertise in Geomorphology, Geology, Geography has written about origination of Pokhara Valley such as: *“The Pokhara valley in the central part of Nepal is one of the few Himalayan intramontane valleys that permits one to decipher the way the land-forms of the world’s highest mountain range evolve. The valley is attractive to tourists for the scenic maj-esty of its glaciated mountains, gorges, caves, and lakes, the formation of which results from a complex yet recent and dramatic evolution of the valley. For a long time, most of the inhabitants believed that the*

*valley originated from the drying up of a huge lake similar to those of the Kathmandu and Kashmir valleys. Careful observations of the sediments filling the basin indicate that the Pokhara valley was affected by a giant, catastrophic debris flow five centuries ago. It is an emblematic site, where the steepness of the still rising front of the very Himalaya (“the abode of snow”) is maintained by sporadic collapses of the mountain walls controlled by a combination of both glacial and seismo-tectonic dynamics.”*

## **Eight days walk three centuries ago**

Before the lake drifted away from Pokhara Valley, its surroundings were already inhabited by population of Tibeto-Burman origins. There was rise of Ghale Kingdom around Sarangkot. In around 15th century, people from hills started to come down in the valley as cow herders. Meanwhile the Ghale and Tamu principalities were blooming in this region. The history of Pokhara goes back to history of Kingdom of Kaski. In the 18th century the Shah dynasty overthrew the throne of Kaski and took the power from Ghales. **During those times, Pokhara Valley was not habitable yet. Considerable part of Pokhara was malaria zone.** Settlements started to arise in few places of Pokhara around 16th century.

## **Urban History**

The urban history of Pokhara kicked off with arrival of Newa people. In mid-18th century the rulers of Kingdom of Kaski invited Newa from Khwapa(Bhaktapur) when it was envisioned as a commercial center by the King of Kaski. Ranajit Malla, the ruler of Khwapa sent 26 households to Kaski, as invited. It took around eight days walk from Khwapa to Pokhara. These first Newa settlers are known as “26 kuriya”.

The Newa settlers were skilled in stonework, wood carving, metal craft, art, architecture and had rich cultural practices and established a town around now known as Ganesh Tole, Bhimsen Tole and Bhairav Tole. These localities were known by the name of temples that Newa people established. One of the important reason for choosing to stay at this place is that water was available for cultivation, paddy fields and forests were close by. With arrival of Newa people arrived their culture and practices too, which got localized in this new geographical area.





*A glimpse of Old Pokhara, Pokhara.*

## **The growth of trade**

Pokhara was located at a gateway to Tibet, and people going to Thaag (Thak Khola) for fetching salt had their stopover here. Tibetan spices and medicinal herbs were also brought to Pokhara for trading. Trade not just connected with Kathmandu, but also with Bhairahawa. Historical sources reveal that these Newa merchants used to travel to Indian cities like Lucknow and Patna for marketing.

The established merchant town grew to become self-sufficient in food, and so food items were not imported from outside. Later on, the market also facilitated the distribution of goods produced for households and required for farming — spades, axes, sickles, bamboo baskets of various types, tobacco and ropes.

## **The travel**

The travel to Pokhara from Khwapa was not the same as today where highways passing through low lands make an easy cut-off. In the Malla period the kingdom of Yén (Kathmandu) was spread far across than that of today's Kathmandu district. The Western Gateway of Yén was Na Kwaa, what we call now Nuwakot Durbar. The Na Kwaa (Nuwakot Durbar) and Sanghu Bazaa (Trishuli Bazar) played a role to border Newa kingdoms and Tamang kingdoms.

One's journey started from Manda Falcha in Kathmandu, which is now called Sorakhutte. Walking upward Lhuti(Balaju) towards Sanghu Bazaa (Trishuli Bazar) crossing the Newa border to Dhading Beshi, Aarughat, Paungtar, Kunchaa, Khaalte, Deurali, Sisuwa, Bijaypur, Kundahal and finally to now what is Old Pokhara.

Unlike today, Pokhara was only known to be a T-shaped merchant town. There was a dozen household around Ranipauwa, Tersapatti, and Arghau.

## **Series of migration**

The 26 household Newa who arrived first to establish a merchant town, started to invite their families after seeing a place suitable for residence. The arrival of Newa in Pokhara were in various series. Another series of Newa arrived here to escape the torture of Gorkhali troops. It is said that many other Newa migrated fearing torture at the hands of the invading Gorkhali army, for it was common in those days that the defeated were tortured inhumanely. While Gorkhali troops burnt down houses, slaughtered people in their homeland, there were many to flee away here and there, among which many fled to Pokhara.

The Newa population in Pokhara is generally originated from Khwapa while a smaller number of population is also from Yén (Kathmandu), Yala (Lalitpur) and Bhonta (Banepa), who came at different times.

## **The Newa merchant town and its architecture**

The merchant town of Pokhara is T-shaped. The concept of “tole” in Parbate language of “twaa/two” in Newa language is a group of houses in a neighborhood which are bonded by a common history of establishment. Old Pokhara consists of Singhanath, Mohariya tole, Bhairav tole, Bhimshen tole, Ganesh tole, Ramkrishna tole, Bagale, Simalchaur, Thadopasal, Tersapatti, Sanghumukh.



*A traditional Newa house in Pokhara.*

## Architecture

Far from the homeland, where natural resources and geography was unlike the Nepal Mandala, Newa people in Pokhara had to find their own ways to built their houses. They came out with their own skills of localization. The Newa style houses of Pokhara, is built with stones in the ground floor. This is very similar to hill architecture such as of Tamu, Magar and other ethnic groups. It was very difficult to bet bricks in Pokhara. Newa houses usually use varieties of bricks such as Maa Appa(very large size bricks), Chikan Appa(bricks lapsed by oil), Dachi Appa, etc. From the ground floor of stones, it was continued by bricks. The only place where bricks were manufactured was Khode Pokhari.

It took nearly four to five years to build a Newa style house in Pokhara, before concrete houses were introduced. Wood was to be brought from very far away. The wood from Shorea robusta was used. It took a long time to be collected, brought and then for about a year it was to be dipped in mud for seasoning. However, the houses were built with Dhaleen: a system of building houses



where wood are placed as lock to make ceiling for another floor. Every house has a beautifully carved window. Sanjhyaa, Tikijhyaa, etc are commonly found windows.



*The Newa architecture in Pokhara at localized form.*



*Roof of Newa houses in Pokhara, made of slate tile “Jhingate”*

The Old Pokhara houses have roof tops made of slate tile called “Jhingate” which are the layers of rock that is extracted immediately after mining. Thinner

layers of rocks are made from large rocks immediately after taking it out from a mine. This is another dissimilarity from Nepal Mandala and another instance of localization. Old Pokhara does not have courtyard system such as Bahaa, Bahee, Laachhi, Nani like that in Nepal Mandala.

Senior citizens reported that there used to be many Falcha, which do not exist anymore since it has been turned into private places. The house was built with red clay, because unlike in Nepa Valley, black clay was not available. With lack of resources, Newa heritages stood with localization in Old Pokhara.

## Farms

The town was surrounded by farms from four sides, of which is now a decreasing trend. People in this town had farms in all four sides for the reason of hailstorms. Every year, there is hailstorm in Pokhara which destroys the food crop of people. In case one side of the farm's crop gets damaged by the hailstone, the food crop in other sides remain safe. In earlier times, Pokhara's natural beauty was not just only the view of snow-covered mountains. , but also banana and orange plantations added colour to the landscape.

## City expansion

Before the elimination of malaria, surrounding hilltops were considered more suitable for settlement. To cultivate lands in the valley, people would come down in the morning and return to their hill villages in the evening. They did not stay in the valley for the fear of malaria. The elimination of malaria in late 1950, made this valley suitable for residence. The visualization of Pokhara Valley till this period was a sparsely populated valley with wide range of agriculture land; the compact merchant town inner densely populated by Newa, while ethnic groups such as Brahmin, Chhetri, Tamu, Magar, Gaine, Damai, Kami etc had scattered settlements around the valley. There were densely populated Magar settlements as well as Tamu settlements surrounding this valley.

The city expanded rapidly after the Maoist Revolution, where people started to find security in Pokhara. The construction of highways further fueled in its expansion.

*“For around 60 years ago, this town gave people the feeling of arriving Pokhara. People from Fewa Lake, Hemja and around wouldn't have said they*



*arrived Pokhara until they entered this town”, Sanakman Bataju, a resident of Bhimshen tole said, “I think it is similar that still many people in Kathmandu tell that they arrived Kathmandu only when they reach the old town area. Even if you reach Thankot which is Kathmandu, people say they are in Thankot, but after they cross Kalimati and in, they say they have arrived Kathmandu.”*

– Sanakman Bataju

## Culture



*Saa Paaru (Gai Jatra) in Pokhara*

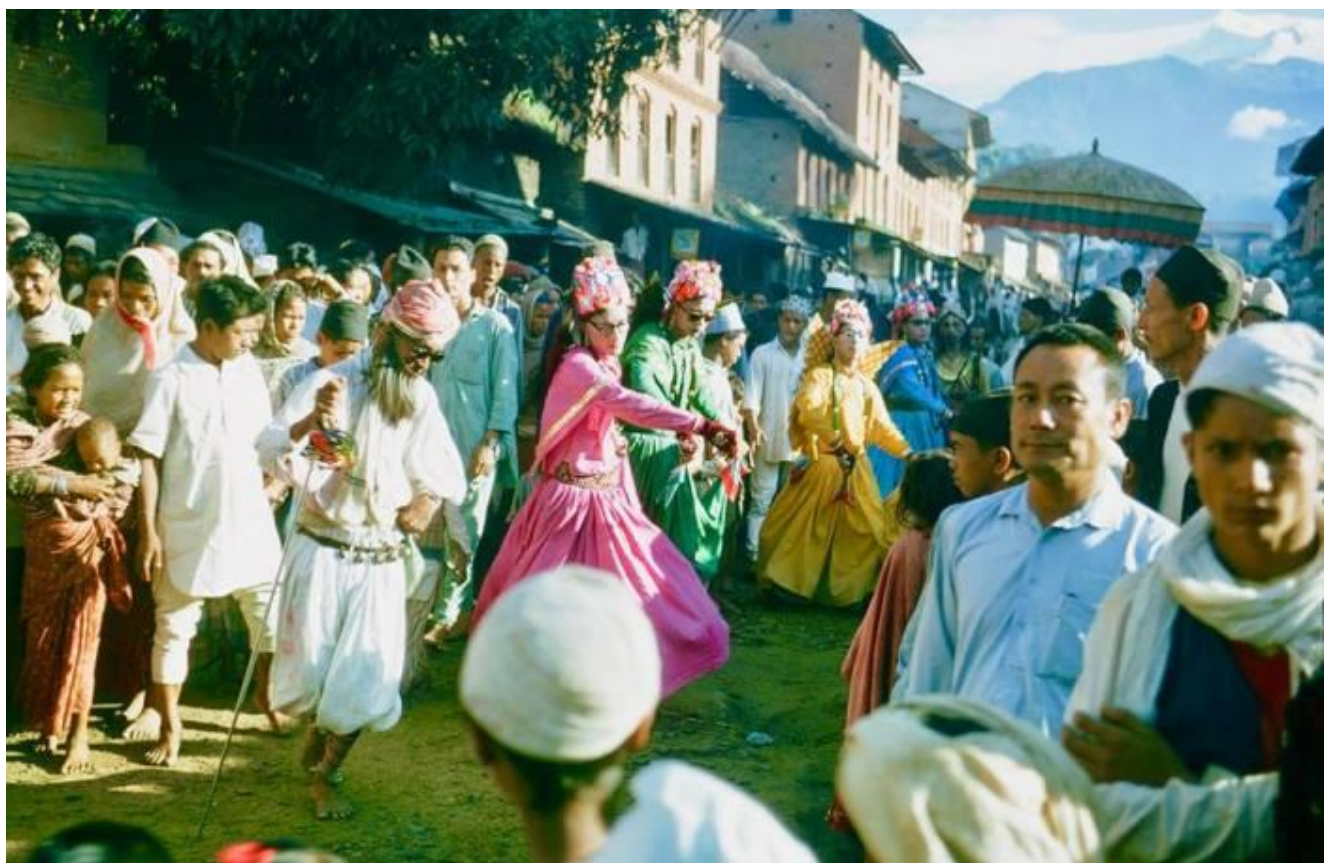
*[Picture courtesy: <http://www.ameetar.com.np>]*

Newa people carried their culture heritage from Khwapa to Pokhara and established its own localized version. Despite settling miles away from Khwapa for more than three centuries now, the Newa people in Pokhara are still connected with their place of origination.

Jatra are one of the most important festivals of Newa communities. In case of Pokhara, the Newa population’s origin can be figured out from the jatra they

celebrate. Due to large number of Khwapa origin, people make a “kha” which is hand lifting chariot during Biskaa Jatra. A round up of the town takes place with people carrying it. People whose origin are from Yén (Kathmandu), Yala(Lalitpur) and Bhonta(Banepa) celebrate their own jatra Pahan Chahre, Bunga Dyo Jatra and Swaanya Punhi, but these jatra do not have pubic processions but observed inside the household.

The Newa population of Pokhara do every festival as Newa in Nepal Mandala celebrate, but it is quite shortened in Pokhara. Many Newa in Pokhara have started to forget their own rites and practices. Saa Paaru (Gai Jatra), Gunhi Punhi, and every other festival in a shortened way is observed here.



*Observation of Saa Paaru(Gai Jatra) in Old Pokhara, 1964. Picture by: [Stuart Ullmann](#)*

The Dhun Jatra (Bagh Jatra) of Pokhara is another cultural baggage brought by Newa which has been celebrated in Pokhara for about 150 years. It expresses the people’s joy at their deliverance from a marauding tiger. On the first day, people dressed up like hunters make an appearance accompanied by musical bands. The next day is an interlude devoted to the showing of comic programs.

Lakhey Pyakhang (Dance) is also performed. Pokhara has its own Lakhey. Interestingly in Lakhey dance music is played by Damai, not Newa.

One of the important traditional dance has been Bhaila Pyakhang or Gan Pyakhang, which is now called Bhairav Naach.

This is a cultural dance that is performed every six years. People put on masks and dress of various dirties and perform symbolical dance. The masks are exhibited after the festival Gathamuga, and the dance is performed after Mohani Nakha(Dashain) for few months. The dance is performed in various tunes and beats “raga” of Newa musical instruments.

## **Guthi**

Guthi, a social organization that is maintains the socio-economic order of Newa society, once was the most powerful social organization of the Newa people, also functions in Pokhara. These guthis exist with its own purpose and its functions governed by the internal unwritten rules, often kept secret and revealed only to its members. Pokhara’s Newa communities used to hold a single See Guthi( a guthi for performing funeral); but now people have made their own guthis based on community, alike in Nepa Valley. There is also a Guthi that runs Bhaila Pyakhang and one that runs Biskaa Jatra.

## **Maintaining relation with origin**

For a long period of time, Newa people in Pokhara had things done from their place of origin. While performing a ritual, Gubhaaju(priest) was invited from Khwapa. Before the highways were constructed, a Gubhaaju from Khwapa would walk eight days long to Pokhara in order to perform a ritual. Then when the civil aviation started, they were invited through plane. It has been only 53 years that Newa of Pokhara established their ancestral scared places in Pokhara, around place called Bagar. Before this, they used to pass their ritual performing materials to someone who was travelling to Khwapa. In around 1965, the Gubhaju from Khwapa asked them to establish their sacred sites in Pokhara so that they don’t have to travel all the way to Khwapa. The Bataju family, a lineage of Newa, established their first sacred site. Then other Newa communities started to visit their place of origin to establish their own sacred site in Pokhara.



The traditional potters “Kumaa” came from Khwapa around beginning of winter and made mud items, pottery and went back for Biskaa Jatra.

## Hiding surname

For many Newa in Pokhara, hiding surname has currently been a trend. They have started putting their surname as “Shrestha”, no matter whatever is their surname. One of the reason of doing this is not being a dominant population, many people from other ethnicity find it difficult and even comment Newa surnames as “weird” “bizarre”. Pokhara’s Newa population, just like in Nepa Valley has diverse surnames, which now people have replaced as “Shrestha”.

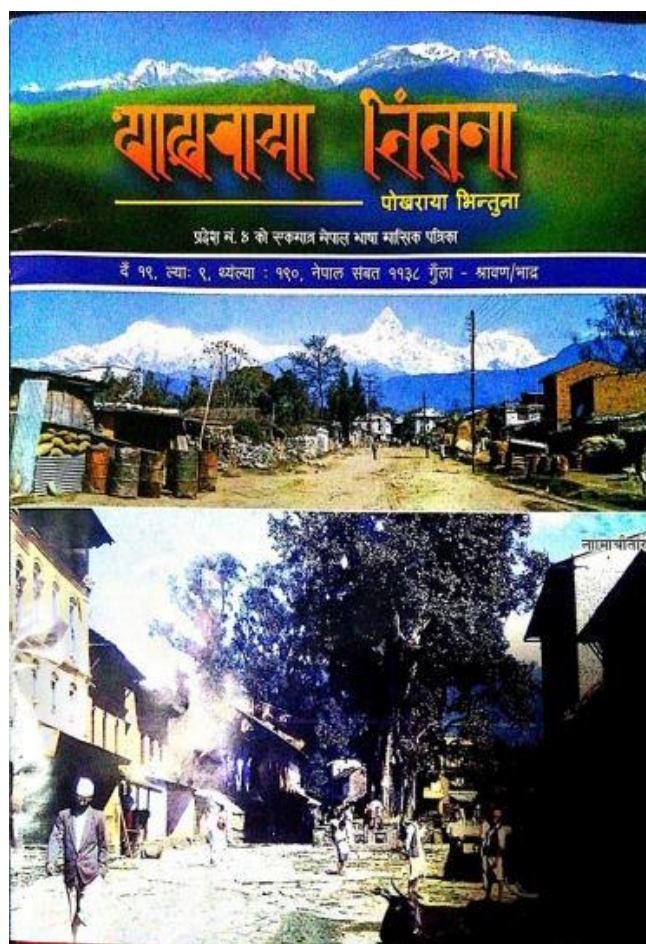
## The language



*People having a conversation in front of their house, Bhimshen tole*

The Nepal Bhasa of Pokhara maintains its close relation with Khwapa dialect of Nepal Bhasa. However Parbate Kura and Tamu language also has its influences in dialect here.

Prakash Palikhe, a resident formerly at Ganesh tole, now at Nagdhunga remembers the days when everyone used to speak Nepal Bhasa in the bazar. The daily language of communication was Nepal Bhasa in those times, where even people from other ethnic groups knew to speak Nepal Bhasa. The generation who speak fluent Nepal Bhasa are the senior citizens, while at a number of finger count those people from other various ethnic groups who could speak Nepalbhasa are also senior citizens.



*Pokhara Ya Bhintuna Monthly Magazine*

Even till forty years ago, there were many who could speak fluent Nepal Bhasa, but now most of the people from younger generation have forgotten their native language, while many can just understand but not reply. Nevertheless, the Newa population of Pokhara fluently spoke Parbate Kura as well, which would be unlikely in Nepa Valley since a large number of senior citizens could not speak Parbate Kura fluently or at all. Interestingly many of them also knew Tamu language fluently.



It seems that use of Newa scripts have not been documented in Pokhara, and even when Nepal Bhasa was dominant language in the bazar area, written culture wasn't existing. Attempts have been made to revive Nepal Bhasa in Pokhara. Many classes are run by inviting teachers from Nepa Valley to teach birth to date rituals and language.

There is also a magazine called “Pokhara Ya Bhintuna” which is published in Nepal Bhasa.

## Loosing heritage



Not just is Nepal Bhasa squeezing out, but also is the Old town. The three century old history, that explains relation of 300 kilometers, is now being stagnated. Only few houses in traditional architecture is remaining. Due to financial issues, people could not replace the rock layer made roof and placed corrugated roofing. The beautifully carved windows are loosing its essence as the houses that have it isn't standing longer.



The Panchayat government had brought a policy to save heritage towns like these, but its inefficient working could not help save the heritage town. As per the residents say, the feeling of heritage is not really strong among Newa population in Pokhara and when they feel so, financial circumstances and a larger belief about modernization keeps them away.

## Gallery



























































































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